

HENRY CLAY WHITCOMB



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In Memoriam

HENRY CLAY WHITCOMB

READ BEFORE THE
FRANKLIN TYPOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

SEPTEMBER 3, 1914

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BOSTON
PRINTED FOR THE SOCIETY
1914

HENRY CLAY WHITCOMB was pre-eminently an example of the best type of New England manhood. He was of the seventh generation from John Whitcomb, the first of the name in this country, who came to Dorchester in 1633 from Dorchester, England, the ancient Dorsetshire town which three years before had furnished many of the well-organized Puritan company that had voyaged to New England in the ship *Mary and John*, and had given its name to the Massachusetts town. John Whitcomb removed from Dorchester in 1640 and bought a large farm in Scituate, his death occurring at Lancaster in 1662. From the earliest days the Whitcombs were men of standing in the community, James, second of the name, owning in Boston the land where the Tremont Building now stands.

Henry C. Whitcomb was born in Winchester, N. H., April 8, 1831, his father, John Adams Whitcomb, having gone there from West Boylston to establish a cotton mill, he being at the time connected with a syndicate which had established mills in various New England towns, including the original Bartlett mills at Newburyport. The family, in which were six sons and one daughter, came to Boston in 1840, and lived at different periods at the West and South Ends of the city. Only one of the sons is now living — John D. Whitcomb, for sixty-six years in the employ

of the Boston *Transcript*, the greater portion of the time as superintendent of its composing-room.

Following the custom of his day and generation, which provided that boys not intended for the professions, after thoroughly mastering the three Rs, should early start to learn a trade, in 1843 Mr. Whitcomb entered the employ of the New England Type and Stereotype Foundry, where he served for sixteen years, becoming well grounded as a practical workman. During this period he worked on the original plates of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and "The Lamplighter," and on one of the earlier editions of the poems of Oliver Wendell Holmes. In 1859 changes in ownership brought about a separation of the establishment into two concerns, the type-founding part of the business becoming known as the New England Type Foundry, and the stereotyping branch, after a further change in proprietors, becoming the New England Stereotype Foundry. Here it was as foreman that Mr. Whitcomb was employed when he enlisted for Civil War service, and it was to this concern that he returned at the conclusion of his tour of duty.

Tall and athletic of build and delighting in physical exercise Mr. Whitcomb as a young man had manifested great interest in military affairs. Previous to the war he was a member of the old Boston Artillery and held the prize rank of being the best-drilled in the manual of arms. In September, 1862, with his brother John he enlisted in Company E of the Forty-Fifth Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteers,

known as the Cadet Regiment, it having been commanded, officered and largely recruited among men who were connected with the First Corps of Cadets, many of whom were personal friends. The nine months' service of the regiment was confined wholly to the Department of North Carolina, it taking part in the affairs and operations at Kinston, Whitehall, Goldsboro, Trenton, Gum Swamp, Dover Cross Roads and Bachelder's Creek, and also in February, 1863, performing duty as Provost Guard of New Berne, N. C. After being mustered out July 7, 1863, the regiment was shortly after again called into service by Governor Andrew to enforce order in Boston during the Draft Riots of that year.

Although the varied activities of Mr. Whitcomb's long life brought him into contact with many outside the sphere of business it is of course that phase which has to do with his connection with the firm of electrotypers and engravers bearing his name that has peculiar interest to the printing fraternity. His employment as apprentice, journeyman and foreman, covered a period of twenty-two years. In February, 1865, he became associated with Scrymgeour & Co., a firm that had been established the year previous, and in the following June the style was changed to Scrymgeour & Whitcomb. In 1866 the business came into possession of Mr. Whitcomb and George C. Scott, and the sign of H. C. Whitcomb & Co., Practical Stereotypers and Electrotypers, appeared at the doorway of the old Carter Building on Water Street. In 1875 the plant

was removed to the Sewall Block on Milk Street, thence in 1884 to Arch Street, and finally in 1907 to its present location on Broad Street. In 1878 Mr. Whitcomb's brother William became a member of the firm, and in 1880 Joseph H. Ware, a nephew of David Scrymgeour, founder of the business, was admitted to partnership, he having been an employee of the concern since 1865, beginning as apprentice. William F. Whitcomb died in 1889, and in the same year Mr. Scott established himself and sons as a new firm of electrotypers, a branch of their business becoming later a part of the Norwood Press. During the latter years of Mr. Whitcomb's life practically entire charge of the affairs of the partnership fell upon his surviving associate, Mr. Ware, who is now continuing the business under the firm name of the H. C. Whitcomb Company.

As a proprietor, Mr. Whitcomb paid close attention to detail. Thoroughly familiar with the practical end of the business he looked after the completed product of his plant with the closest scrutiny. Imperfect plates seldom ran the gauntlet of his trained eye, and it was a matter of pride with him that all electrotypes should leave his establishment as nearly perfect as human skill could make them. Labor-saving machinery was early invented and became an important factor in the growth and development of the firm, which was the first in Boston to introduce electrical appliances for perfecting and expediting work. Mr. Whitcomb guided his estab-

lishment through numberless innovations and always was ready to adopt new ideas, many of them revolutionary in their scope and effect. The changes during the seventy years that he was identified with the trade seem almost incredible. Only the older men in our ranks can remember the method of making the stereotype plates which formed the bulk of the work turned out in the '60s, electrotyping then being a process so costly as to be nearly prohibitive, while the nickeltype and steel-faced plates of to-day were unknown to the printing fraternity of that date.

An essential requirement of the successful business man is that he shall be a good judge of men. The captain of industry must choose lieutenants thoroughly competent to manage departments and if need be carry on the business. Mr. Whitcomb possessed this trait in marked degree, as is shown in his choice of partners, and as middle age approached financial success permitted him to test the ability of his associates by frequent absences from business activity. Often that longing for travel which is characteristic of the printing trade led him to make journeys far from home, both in his native land and in foreign countries. One of the first of these excursions was to the Azores in the barque *Sarah*, a packet vessel making regular sailings to the Islands from Boston and carrying on each trip many who were attracted by the restfulness and quiet of this now obsolete method of travel. Crossing to Spain, he leisurely enjoyed a stay in that country, and eventually,

in returning homeward, he journeyed through France and England. Later in life he built a cottage and became one of the summer colony at Deer Isle, Me., for many years taking each season a long period of rest at that attractive resort.

In 1872, Mr. Whitcomb took up his residence at Dorchester in the house numbered 20 School Street. While it was in his connection with the printing business that he was best known to a majority of the members of the Franklin Typographical Society and to the public at large, to a few among us the privilege was given to be acquainted with him in the more intimate way that comes through association as a neighbor as well as personal friend. Mr. Whitcomb's home life was ideal in its simplicity. His Dorchester estate was the typical home delighted in by men of a former generation in comfortable circumstances, a place not too large to receive the personal attention of the owner, and consisting of a pleasantly situated house with stable, having an abundance of trees and shrubbery and ample room for flowers and a garden. Here for more than forty years he made his home; here in 1876 occurred the death of his only child, a daughter of great promise; and here in 1907 passed away his beloved wife and inseparable companion, Caroline E. Wiswell, *née* Mann, a helpmeet in all good deeds, to whom he was married in 1864 and who was one of the few women who have been elected to

honorary membership in our Society. To Mr. Whitcomb his Dorchester residence was an idyll of restfulness and peace. After the death of his wife it was thought he would not care to keep up the establishment, but with that wise judgment which was characteristic of the man he chose to spend his declining years in a spot which had become hallowed to him by associations and where he could find the maximum of comfort in its thoroughly familiar surroundings.

Mr. Whitcomb's early residence in Dorchester was the most strenuous period of his life. Engaged in the upbuilding of a large business, it was the era of long hours — the eight-hour day and Saturday afternoon holiday being considered the visionary schemes of a few enthusiasts. Notwithstanding the demands made upon his time, Mr. Whitcomb was ready to take part in any movement for the public welfare which would benefit the neighborhood in which he lived. Although affiliated with Unitarian organizations he was much interested in the Harvard Congregational Church of Dorchester, in 1888 assisting in its formation and making annually liberal contributions for its support. He was also one of the charter members of the Harvard Improvement Association, the pioneer organization of the kind in Greater Boston, in which he served on many committees.

As in the '70s fairly good service between Dorchester and Boston was maintained by the Metropolitan line of horse cars, Mr. Whitcomb was enabled to continue his attendance at the

now dissolved New South Church (Unitarian), of which he was senior deacon and treasurer of the charity disbursing fund of the society. During his connection with this church he was a valued member who could be depended upon to do his part in carrying on its activities. Both here and later at the First Church in Roxbury, where also he was senior deacon, he was to be found at the right hand of the minister, a tower of strength in every emergency that arose.

In the related philanthropies of the Unitarian Church, Mr. Whitcomb was ever ready to lend a hand. As a personal friend of its late president, William H. Baldwin, he was especially interested in the Boston Young Men's Christian Union, and was an honorary member of that institution. A philanthropy which jointly interested Mr. Whitcomb and his wife more, perhaps, than any other, was the Home for Aged Couples. From its inception and in the infancy of this organization, when money was scarce and had to be raised by personal solicitation and through the medium of fairs, they were devoted workers in its behalf. Other institutions in which they together maintained a lively interest were the Children's Mission to the Children of the Destitute, the Barnard Memorial, the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, and the Franklin Square House.

Mr. Whitcomb's membership in the Franklin Typographical Society dated from 1859, when as a journeyman he became an active member. Business cares prevented him

from holding the office of president, to which undoubtedly he would have been chosen had he been able to accept, but he was a member of the Board of Trustees for many years, and his advice in matters relating to the Society was frequently sought and freely given. In its nearly a century of existence the Franklin Typographical Society has been favored in generous measure with the loyal interest and support of many of the leading printers of Boston who have held either active or honorary membership. It takes a pardonable pride in the record of such men as Mr. Whitcomb, whose efforts in its behalf have been both disinterested and effective.

The breadth and scope of this life which has been brought to a close and which was noteworthy for its loyalty to duty, its kind thoughtfulness for others, its broadness and charity, is well illustrated by enumerating the organizations with which Mr. Whitcomb was connected. In addition to those already mentioned, many of which had especially honored him by election to their boards of government, he was a director of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association, trustee of the Roxbury Latin School, a member of the Forty-Fifth Regiment Association, Benjamin Stone, Jr., Post 68, G. A. R.; Master Printers' Association; United Typothetæ; Joseph Warren Lodge, A. F. and A. M.; Mt. Vernon Royal Arch Chapter; Joseph Warren Commandery, Knights Templar; Tremont Lodge, I. O. O. F.; and through direct descent from Colonel Asa Whitcomb, prominent in the

Colonial and Revolutionary Wars, and who with his regiment responded at the Lexington alarm and was at the Battle of Bunker Hill, he held membership in the Massachusetts Society, Sons of the American Revolution.

Favored with a splendid constitution and taking the best of care of himself, Mr. Whitcomb's health was excellent long after he had passed the allotted threescore and ten. His ruddy face glowed with health and his erect figure bore bravely the weight of increasing years. None of his friends can forget the pleasant smile, the cordial grasp of the hand, the kindly interest in their affairs with which he greeted those who met him. His was an ideal old age, mellowed and made happy by the thought of good deeds planned for the future and those already accomplished. Although able to walk about the house, and occasionally visit Boston, his health for the last three years of his life had not been of the best. Death, which came to him on Monday, March 30, 1914, was caused primarily by an accident from which his right hip was fractured, pneumonia supervening.

Funeral services were held on Thursday, April 2, 1914, at the First Church in Roxbury, and were largely attended, representatives being present from all the organizations of which he was a member and of the institutions in which he had so long been actively interested. The atmosphere of quiet that pervaded the historic edifice, the profusion of flowers, the flag-draped casket, the little group of comrades in arms—veterans of his

regiment and of the Grand Army—made a scene fitting to the passing of one who after a serene old age “wraps the drapery of his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams.” To his intimate friends the keynote of the service was not so much the eloquent and comforting words of Dr. James De Normandie, minister of the church, who officiated, as his reading of that glorious hymn of Isaac Watts, a favorite with Mr. Whitcomb, which expressed so beautifully the confidence, faith, and trust in God which had ever been his:

Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast
And our eternal home:

Under the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.

Mr. Whitcomb's life was not great in the common acceptance of the term. Few would think of placing him among the conspicuous men of Massachusetts of his day and generation. But this very fact made him a leader whose influence for good was much greater than if he had in a larger degree attained distinction, for he worked with coat off among his fellows and furnished an example that any man might copy. Through all the generations such men as Mr. Whitcomb have been in the forefront of the world's progress in right living, and they have made America,

the youngest of the earth's great nations, leader in every movement for the betterment of mankind.

Let us as fellow craftsmen profit by the lesson that has been brought so closely home to us; let us leave to our successors in the work of this Society the inspiration that came from our association with this worthy and benevolent man, and let us cherish his memory so long as any among us are spared to labor in a cause that enlisted his sympathy and received his cordial support.

THE SOUTHGATE PRESS—T. W. RIPLEY COMPANY
PRINTERS



